

**The Jonestown hecatomb was an exercise in human tragedy. American radio amateurs had no idea that they were privy to a prelude to death.**

# Amateur Radio and The People's Temple Net

BY JOHANN WILLIAM RUSH\*

Amateur radio operators traditionally have been noted for zeal and enthusiasm when it comes to helping a worthy cause. We can point with pride to our work with special interest nets, emergency communications during disasters and the countless phone patches uniting servicemen with their families. On rare occa-

sions, however, it backfires. The Jonestown debacle is a prime example. Whether it was the humanitarian altruism coming forward (which I prefer to think) or merely the desire for scratching another country off the list, amateurs did provide a significant form of aid to the People's Temple. They survived in the jungle with

our help and prospered exacting who knows what ultimate price in misery. Mr. Rush can and does supply the details of this tragic episode. Time may supply the weave that completes the fabric of the story. Why, we'd like to know, were so many people enthralled to aid and protect something they obviously knew so very little about? Hopefully, we may learn from this event to question the things which we support and to examine who's best interests are being served. There is quite a difference between being fallible and being dangerously foolish.

-K2EEK



Phillip P. Spencer, a New Orleans attorney and amateur radio operator, made two contacts with Al Touchette at Jonestown last year on 14.250 MHz. When Mr. Spencer asked Peoples Temple member Al Touchette if he would send a QSL card, Touchette agreed but only if he received a "donation" in return. Spencer mailed \$1 to Jonestown and soon received the card.

Less than a week after the murder of Congressman Leo Ryan and the disastrous mass suicide of 900 People's Temple cultists in Jonestown, Guyana, last November, newspapers around the country began running articles about local amateur radio operators who had made contact with the Jonestown outpost. It seems that several dozen stateside amateurs had had brief QSOs with Al Touchette, WB6MID/8R3, Jim Jones' chief radio operator at the remote jungle commune, and a few of those U.S. hams called their local hometown newspapers to let them know about it.

Although some of the stories ran over Associated Press and United Press International, they seemed to be of little importance, merely an interesting "sidebar" to the main

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murder/suicide story itself. As the Christmas season rolled around, most news agencies began to relegate Peoples Temple follow-up reports to back pages, and by mid-January, media interest in the amateur radio aspect seemed to fade out completely. After all, why bother to report yet another amateur who had spoken to WB6MID/8R3 once or twice?

But, as it turns out, there's more to this story than what was first reported. From a Baton Rouge (Louisiana) paper I learned that an amateur, Phillip Spencer, an attorney in New Orleans, had not only spoken to Jonestown, but had received a QSL card from the Peoples Temple in Guyana. I thought a close look at the card might turn up something interesting so I went to New Orleans to interview Mr. Spencer. Indeed, it seems that the national press missed the whole point about amateur radio contact with the cult of Jim Jones, and in fact, much of the cult's activities in Guyana during the past two years may not have been possible without the cooperation of *hundreds* of unsuspecting stateside amateurs who helped Al Touchette relay *thousands* of messages from Guyana to San Francisco!

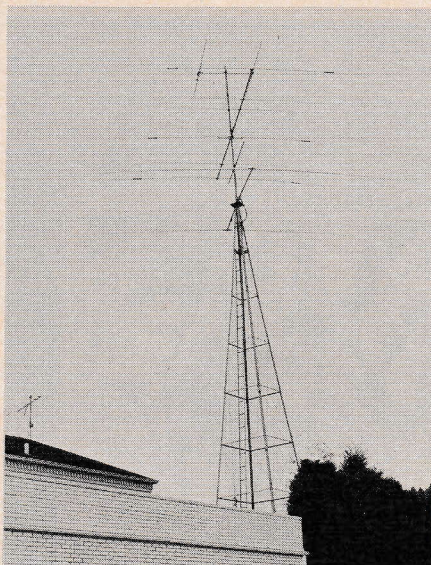
I began to conduct an intense investigation regarding this case. From a Mississippi amateur who talked with Jonestown, I learned that TV reporter Roy Neal (NBC's science editor) also an amateur, K6DUE, is on the air in Burbank, California, nearly every night. I contacted Mr. Neal and learned that his office was right next to that of Don Harris, the NBC newsman slain at the Port Kaituma airport in Guyana, but that Neal had *never* had any contact with either the Jonestown or San Francisco Peoples Temple radio operators. Why? "It was nearly impossible for any California station to receive signals from Guyana," he said, "and San Francisco's signal to Guyana skipped right over us here in the Los Angeles area."

Mr. Neal suggested I contact the San Francisco DA's office whose investigators are trying to interview all amateurs who had talked with Jonestown. This led me to Doug Keener, of the DA's staff, who was a wealth of information.

"What we've come up with is that the Peoples Temple had a transceiver in San Francisco, one in Jonestown, and one in Georgetown, Guyana (which is about 150 miles out of Jonestown)," said Mr. Keener. "It's true that Guyana signals would barely reach San Francisco, so what they would do was use a *phone patch*

setup and relay the message via different amateur operators from various stations along the U.S. East Coast."

Here's how their system worked: Al Touchette in Jonestown would try to reach Ben Bowers, WA6DTJ, or Elton Adams, WD6DVI, in San Francisco. About 20% of the time, the two stations could talk direct, but about 80% of the time, phone patches were required. Touchette would put out a call in the 20-meter band (usually at 14.250 MHz) to any stateside amateur who had phone patch capabilities. Sometimes the same person was used



*Phillip Spencer used this Mosley Tri-band Classic 36 antenna and a Collins S-Line KWM2 radio (with 2,000 watts PEP) for his communication between New Orleans and Jonestown.*

over and over again, sometimes new amateurs were found and used only once. The stateside contact would then be asked to place a collect telephone call to the San Francisco Peoples Temple headquarters and the conversation—carried part by radio transmissions and part by telephone lines—would take place.

This Peoples Temple communication network was used for *more than two years*, perhaps for as many as *five years*. Jim Jones first visited Guyana in 1973, and established his smaller pioneer outpost of Jonestown (then called "Mission Village") in 1974. No one is sure when the transceiver was first installed there, but the FCC began receiving complaints from American amateurs about unauthorized 20-meter traffic out of Jonestown as early as 1976.

Rumors have been floating around

for months ranging from, "*the FCC failed to act on those letters of complaint*" to "*the FCC recorded all the transmissions and were about to pull the licenses of Bowers, Adams, and Touchette.*" Neither rumor is based on fact, and the truth lies somewhere in between. The FCC's part in monitoring the Peoples Temple communication network is most intriguing.

I talked with FCC attorneys Gerald Zuckerman and Molly Fitzgerald in Washington, and with Stephen Tsuya, an engineer who recorded nearly 50 hours of Peoples Temple transmissions at the Douglas, Arizona monitoring station.

"First let me say that we did not actually monitor the *Peoples Temple*," said Mr. Zuckerman. "We monitored WA6DTJ (Bowers) and WD6DVI (Adams). As you know, amateur station licenses are held by individuals. We can never monitor an organization, only a licensee or his station. We monitored only the San Francisco station as operated by Bowers and Adams. Since by law, we have no jurisdiction over any foreign license holder or foreign station, we had little interest in Al Touchette or the Jonestown or Georgetown stations." A very interesting situation!

The FCC monitored Bowers and Adams from May, 1977 to late September, 1978, but it seems that they never monitored Al Touchette's phone patch calls out of Jonestown. It was possible of course, and well within their legal rights, since the part of the phone patch message going out of the United States had to have been transmitted by a cooperating stateside amateur. But the FCC still could not have done anything to Touchette—or even to Bowers or Adams—when the phone patches took place. However, the FCC *could* have acted against the amateurs who were relaying the patches via their East Coast stations, had any business been conducted during these transmissions.

Why weren't the cooperative amateurs monitored? The FCC says that no complaints were received against them and random monitoring—to try to catch phone patch messages from Bowers and Adams—would have been useless since hundreds of different amateur intermediaries played a part in this unusual network.

What put the FCC onto the Peoples Temple case in the first place? Before Jim Jones moved to the Jonestown commune himself, with more than 1,000 of his followers in late 1977, the San Francisco and Guyana stations were in contact on a daily (or nightly)



basis. Dozens of the *direct* radio exchanges that did get through were monitored by amateurs across the country. It was obvious that Jones and his followers were using the 20-meter band to conduct business, and this of course is in violation of FCC rules and regulations. Dozens of complaint letters began to arrive at FCC headquarters in Washington.

"These transmissions had a lot to do with the daily goings-on with what was necessary for them to survive down at the mission in Jonestown," said Doug Keener of the San Francisco DA's office. "The conversations involved information on the shipments of raw materials,

Jones to devise a cipher of rather simple code words used to represent different parts of their business transmissions. The FCC saw right through the ciphers and sent out more letters warning that licenses might be revoked if the illegal transmissions continued.

A general Peoples Temple expose story ran in California's *New West* magazine in 1977, and Jones appeared to become paranoid. He felt there were plots developing against him and his followers. One of his attorneys, Mark Lane, reports that Jones felt the government was in one a plot and that the FCC letters were evidence of such a plot. Lane told me

officially—that they did enough to discourage the illegal use of amateur radio by Peoples Temple members. They issued one forfeiture fine of \$50 to Bowers, then dropped their investigation in late September of 1978.

By then, Jones and most of his cultists had been living in Jonestown, Guyana, for more than nine months and had refined their communication net to try to avoid the wrath of the FCC.

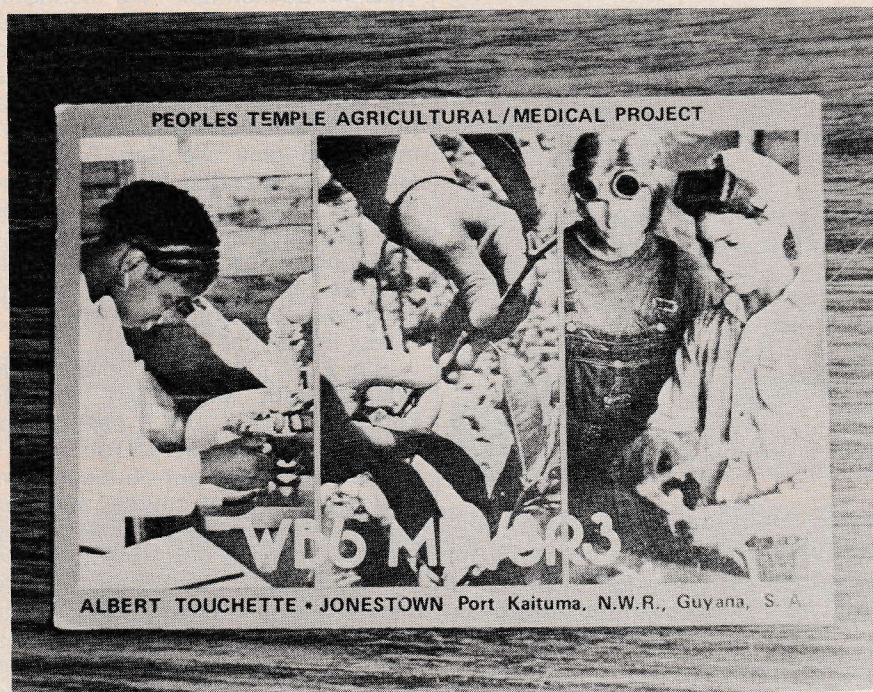
Cipher was used constantly, but it was so simple—basic word transpositions and special slang—that the FCC must have considered it innocuous. More and more phone patches were used by Jones so that better signals could be received from and transmitted San Francisco. Frequencies were changed in mid-transmission—signaled by certain code words—when *direct* radio contact was made with San Francisco.

When cooperative and unsuspecting amateurs weren't available for phone patches, Al Touchette would often rely on members of the MARCO net (the Medical Amateur Radio Council) to either place phone patches or relay phony medical emergency messages. One MARCO member, Dr. Walter Thain, WB4KKK, of Florida, became suspicious when he detected many routine non-emergency business transmissions coming out of Jonestown.

Dr. Thain recorded several hours of Peoples Temple transmissions and wrote a letter to the FCC asking if his cooperation with Jonestown was against the rules and regulations. Their reply? No, not if the messages were legitimate, and not if he, personally, observed all of the rules and regulations when *he* transmitted relay messages for Jonestown.

Dr. Thain continued his relationship with the Peoples Temple members and actually visited Jonestown shortly after the amateur radio community helped relay emergency medical messages to the commune in May of 1978, when a commune member was having difficulty in giving birth to twins at the jungle outpost. Dr. Thain had already made plans to attend a meeting with members of the Pan American Cancer Cytology Society in Georgetown, Guyana, in May, and while there, flew by charter plane to Jonestown as the guest of Jim Jones.

Dr. Thain said recently that although the commune appeared somewhat unorthodox, there was nothing there to suggest the bizarre disaster that was to take place six months later. When the murder and suicide news broke on November 18, 1978, Dr. Thain immediately con-



Many ham operators overlooked some of the irregular Peoples Temple radio traffic when they learned they could add this rare Guyana card to their collection.

generators, food, medical supplies, diesel fuel, tools. This business activity infuriated many law-abiding amateurs who listened in, but when they would go on the air to complain, Touchette, Bowers, or Adams just cut them short or changed frequencies," he said.

By the end of 1977, Jim Jones' unusual and sometimes lawless activities were beginning to be noticed by a number of investigative newspaper reporters in San Francisco, and his radio traffic was now being monitored by the FCC at the Douglas station. Official "cease and desist" letters were mailed to Bowers and Adams by the FCC, and this led

that he, too, believed there might be some truth to the "government plot" theory since the FCC apparently had enough evidence to pull the licenses, yet did not do so despite the numerous complaints from amateurs.

Before he left the country, Jim Jones had his followers write more than 2,000 letters to the FCC to complain to that agency about "government harassment" of their "religious" organization. This took the FCC by surprise—it was unprecedented—and it just may have had some influence in the FCC's decision *not* to recall Bowers' and Adams' licenses. The FCC denies the letters had any influence and feels—of-



tacted the FBI office nearest his home and turned over all his tapes and as much documentary evidence as possible.

While dozens of amateurs were complaining to the FCC about Peoples Temple activity, it seems that *hundreds* were actually *cooperating* with Temple members, although many of the amateurs knew that all of the transmissions weren't 100% legitimate. Why? Any amateur contact with Guyana had been rare before Touchette set up his station there. Some reports say that there were only half a dozen amateur stations in all of Guyana. There always seemed to be a missing stick pin on the American amateur's wall maps. A QSL card from Guyana? "Wow, I need one of those." seemed to be the attitude.

Touchette had QSL cards printed by the thousands. Each one read, "WB6MID/8R3—PEOPLES TEMPLE AGRICULTURAL/MEDICAL PROJECT." The call sign WB6MID had been Touchette's stateside call and registered in Redwood Valley, California. The "8R3" was added when he moved to Guyana.

Sources close to the investigations (the FBI, the FCC, the San Francisco DA's office) all say that thousands of transmissions were made by use of the phone patch setup. But who are the amateurs who communicated with Jonestown? Investigative reporter and amateur operator Mike Wendland reported in the *Detroit News* that his paper is in possession of a tape recording made by an unnamed Florida amateur in which Jim Jones can be heard preaching over WB6MID/8R3 for nearly two hours.

Wendland also reported that Herb Schoenbohm, KV4FZ, a resident of the Virgin Islands, overheard the Jonestown station talking with the Georgetown station the week Congressman Ryan was in Guyana. Schoenbohm is supposed to have heard Temple members saying that, "Nothing will come of Ryan's visit but a lot of trouble."

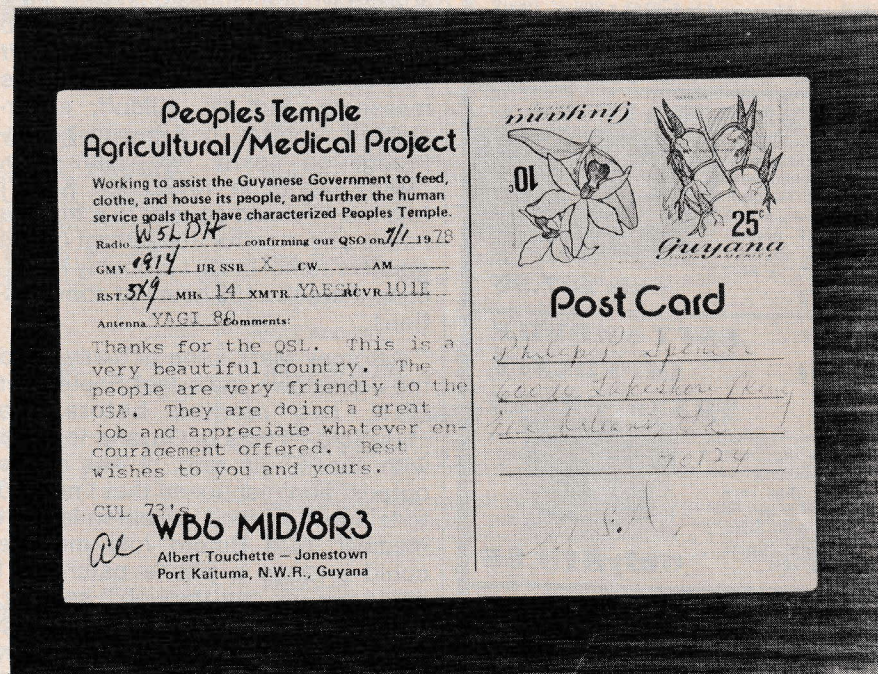
San Francisco District Attorney investigator, Doug Keener, reported that a cult survivor who has been interviewed by the DA's office said that he had been in the Georgetown Temple headquarters just a short time after the Jonestown massacre and that another survivor, Linda Amos, told him that, "Everything is over, everyone's gone." Amos was supposed to have said that she had just been "in touch with San Francisco" and had told the Peoples Temple members there to "begin the revenge." Linda Amos apparently said little more because she and her

three children were found murdered that November 18, 1978.

Were there transmissions made on November 18th? So far, no investigator or reporter had been able to find out for sure. I talked with attorney Charles Garry's legal secretary, Pat Richards. Garry, along with Mark Lane, had been held prisoner behind the Jonestown compound as the mass murders and suicides took place. Ms. Richards said that Mr. Garry was in constant contact with the San Francisco Peoples Temple offices and that someone from the Temple called her the

bulletins about the death of Ryan and the newsmen. She called the San Francisco to find out any news of her boss, Charles Garry. "Temple members told me that they had not had any radio communication with Jonestown for the past 24 hours," she said.

Another intriguing message was given to Pat Richards a week before the tragedy. "At the beginning of November, Mr. Garry had decided to withdraw from representing the Peoples Temple, and we told San Francisco members to inform Mr. Jones," she said. "That was on the



*Al Touchette, whose signiture is on the back of the Peoples Temple QSL card, is reported to have committed suicide at Jonestown on November 18, 1978. Attorney Mark Lane, who visited Jonestown, reports that Jim Jones often used the code name "Al" when transmitting messages since Jones did not have a ham license.*

afternoon of the 18th to report, "that a message had just come through from Jonestown to Georgetown to San Francisco saying that Congressman Ryan had met with Jones and had found things at the commune to be wonderful."

"How was the conversation transmitted?" I asked. "I'm not sure there was a conversation," Ms. Richards replied. "I think it was in Morse code or something like that," she said. "The message was supposed to have been relayed here via the East Coast," she added.

Was it "Morse code" or just *cipher code*? Ms. Richards, not being familiar with amateur radio, was not sure. Later that evening she heard

11th. On the 12th or 13th someone came into our office to tell us that Marceline Jones had just relayed a message by radio that her husband was in a semi-comatose condition and packed in ice somewhere in the jungle. No one could reach him to tell him about Mr. Garry's withdrawal."

How did the message reach San Francisco? "They said it was relayed by telephone and radio via the East Coast," she replied. What happened next? "On Wednesday, the 15th, we received another hand-delivered message saying that Jones wanted to see Mr. Garry immediately. He packed and left that night, and arrived in Guyana on Friday morning," said Ms. Richards.



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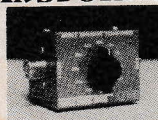
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Other amateurs who had contact with Al Touchette in Jonestown included Bruce Johnson, the international officer for the American Radio Relay League. Johnson monitored several hours of Peoples Temple transmissions and was in frequent communication with the FCC regarding the matter during the summer of 1977. Johnson even wrote to Touchette explaining some of the rules and regulations, but Touchette wrote back saying that the work of the Peoples Temple was so important and humanitarian in nature that a slight bending of the rules would do more good than harm.

Another monitor, and recorder, of Jonestown transmissions was Marshall Kilduff of the *San Francisco Chronicle*. His book *The Suicide Cult* was released just a month after the massacre. But Mr. Kilduff, a far-sighted reporter, had begun his investigation nearly two years ago. "Many nights in 1977," Mr. Kilduff told me, "I would go over to a friend's house and monitor Jonestown on his amateur radio. In all, I probably listened to more than 50 hours of conversations."

Attorney Mark Lane actually used the Jonestown radio last September 17th, two months before the massacre. "I was in Guyana to meet with Jones," he said. "I was at the outpost and mentioned that I needed to talk with a friend in California. Cult member Terri Buford told me she could arrange a phone patch so I could get my call through," said Mr. Lane. According to Lane, Ms. Buford (who doesn't have an amateur license) made a transmission "to a ham in Massachusetts" who, in turn, made a collect call to Mr. Lane's friend in California.

The conversation started but was quickly interrupted by an angry amateur in Florida, said Lane, who later got the man's name and called him when he got back to this country. "He was quite frank about harassing the Temple," said Lane. "Well, he didn't really harass them. He just kept interrupting their transmissions and reading them the rules and regulations."

Doug Keener said that he has talked with amateurs from "most of the states in the East" who had communicated with Jonestown in some way. "There were doctors in Florida, Michigan, Minnesota, North Carolina, Tennessee, and other amateurs in many other states who helped with phone patches," said Mr. Keener. "More hams than we first expected had apparently helped them out. Of course from the reports we are receiving, they just didn't know what they

were getting into," he concluded.

To some, it all sounded so innocent: A racially-mixed agricultural and medical religious commune set up in the jungle of some mysterious and remote South American country. Babies were being born. Operations performed. Doctors and nurses were dedicating their lives to help others. The FCC had no objections to radio transmissions coming out of Guyana. The MARCO net was cooperating. And that beautiful, four color QSL card...with the inscription, "Working to assist the Guyanese Government to feed, clothe, and house its people, and further the human service goals that have characterized the Peoples Temple."

Who is to blame? Amateurs? Those who were aware of the full implications of the messages complained to the FCC. Then is the FCC to blame? They say no, because, after all, they *did* conduct an investigation and they *did* issue a forfeiture.

And what of the newsmen who knew over a year ago that something was amiss with Jones and his cult? Many of them now report that their article ideas were turned down again and again as California politicians got wind of the stories that were about to break and telephoned editors around the state to have the stories—exposes of their personal and long-time friend, Jim Jones—suppressed.

And what about the State Department, whose representatives visited Jonestown and gave it a clean bill of health; and the Customs Department, whose agents apparently ignored warnings that guns were being shipped from San Francisco to Jonestown? Are these agencies blameless?

Even Congressman Leo Ryan and NBC newsmen Don Harris had heard of the suicide threats and possible murder plots proposed by Jim Jones. Yet these educated and informed men flew unarmed into the jungle to scrutinize, to threaten, to harass, and to lay the last straw on Jones' back.

Epilogue: According to the San Francisco DA's office, Al Touchette (WB6MID/8R3) was in Jonestown at the time of the suicides and is now dead. Elton Adams, WD6DVI, was in Guyana at the same time and is presumed to be dead. Ben Bowers, WA6DTJ, was last seen alive in San Francisco. According to Mike Wendland of the Detroit News, the FCC received payment of the \$50 Bowers forfeiture fine on November 28, 1978—ten days after the Jonestown massacre.